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Women's Picnics

Chap. XVI

Then crowds of women and children go outside the city walls to the neighbouring wells and green oases one or two miles away, and take their lunch and tea with them. Men do not accompany their women on these picnics, but each party of women has some slave women and a little boy or two to keep an eye on sisters and mothers and to call for help if necessary. These picnics are one of the most pleasing sights of Kuwait, for it means that women literally have left their prison houses, and are enjoying the lovely countryside and pure air outside the town. The picnics are very simple and well-behaved affairs, and those taking part appear to be happy in the extreme. If these picnics take place well away from any beaten tracks, a certain amount of quiet and decorous dancing also goes on. The women form circles, and whilst one of them starts to let down her hair and dance or sway about in sitting posture, her friends will sing pretty songs and keep time for her. Occasionally a woman slave, who has brought out a small drum, contributes a monotonous drum-beating. Should a man or horseman appear in the offing, singing and dancing is stopped and all become as quiet as mice, till he has passed by.

Occasionally, but not often, a few women of the unfortunate type are allowed to go out in a party for a picnic at *'Id*, but they keep well away from their more respectable sisters, and are never allowed to have men in their company. The official idea is that the festival is an equally happy one for them, and they also are entitled to be carefree and joyful.*

'ID AMONG THE TRIBES

The *'Id* in the desert, as in the town, is an occasion of rejoicing, feasting and paying calls. The people, being poorer and more simple, celebrate the festival with less display and expense. Horse races and camel races are held, however, and if men happen to have spare ammunition, they will have shooting matches.

The unmarried tribal girls go in perhaps for more dancing than their town sisters, and before noon and of an evening groups of them will get inside a tent, let down their hair and, after closing the tent

* In 1938 prostitutes were forbidden to leave the city, and even these picnic outings were prohibited.

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527 curtains, will start their picturesque tribal dances. Elderly women and
535 most of the married ones refrain from dancing, as it is considered unseemly, but the young ones revel in it, and more often than not the young lads of the tents who are related to the dancers are allowed to watch the performance from a decorous distance. This offers them the coveted chance of getting a peep at the face of their future bride.

This girl-dancing continues for only seven days, and is then scrupulously discontinued as savouring of immodesty and worldliness.

My wife and I have always made a point of camping for part of the *'Id* celebrations with various of our Badawin friends, and I have been privileged on several occasions to see Mutair, 'Awazim and Rashaida girls dance. But this privilege has only been extended to me at *'Id* times, never on other occasions. Curiously enough, the fathers of the young women never like to be present, and only lads closely related to the girls, not outsiders, are allowed to look on from a distance. Usually three girls at a time will dance, and they are accompanied by a sing-song chant of the elder women, who stand around and clap their hands to keep time. The dancers discard their *'abbas* and *burqas* and, decked out in all their brilliantly coloured *thaubs* or long flowing undergarments, hop about in short straight-legged jerks, at the same time gracefully swinging their heads from side to side or in circular motion to make their hair fly. The girls often carry a small cane which they hold with one tip in each hand. If they have no such cane they will cover the lower part of their face with one hand, as if out of modesty, or will hold a piece of their sleeve in front of their mouth. Each girl dances till she is exhausted; when tired she stops, puts her *'abba* over her head once more and sits down. Some are very attractive to watch.

Tribal men do not dance in their own homes at all. It is considered irreligious and unmanly to do so, and savours of the low-class *Sulubba*. This taboo does not apply to the *'ardha* described above, which is a war dance in which the highest in the land may take part. On many occasions the great Bin Sa'ud himself has joined in the dance, and gained thereby the favour rather than the criticism of his people.

527 The following five songs are given as examples of tribal dance-
533 songs sung by the elder women as the younger ones dance. They are selected at random from many which my wife and I heard and noted

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565 In cast of countenance they would appear to be definitely non-
619 Arab, and have none of the pronounced Semitic features of the latter.
[142] In areas like Kuwait and Zubair, where they always maintain a
[861] large permanent camp outside the city walls, they are sometimes taken by Europeans for ordinary Badawin. This is a bad mistake and leads at times to awkward situations.

582 No Arab can marry a Sulubba girl. He would be killed by his
595 people if he did, and she also. Nevertheless, I have heard it said that the Amir Fawaz of the Ruwala has no compunction in taking a pretty Sulubba maiden into the desert and keeping her as his mistress. For this he is roundly cursed by all good Badawin.

622 Most Sulubba settlements have their headmen, but where they are
565 in strength among the major tribes of Arabia they have their shaikhs,
619 some of whom own large flocks and herds of camels and are up to a point highly respected.

For instance:

Shaikh Hamad ibn Shennut is the Shaikh of the Mutair Sulubba.
Shaikh Mutallij al Safi is the Shaikh of the Shammar Sulubba.
Shaikh Muhammad ibn Jilad is the Shaikh of the Amarat Sulubba.
Shaikh Ma'aithif is the Shaikh of the Ruwala Sulubba.

291 The Sulubba women never veil and rarely wear a *milfa* over the lower part of their faces. Hence in Najd they are at once recognisable.

535 They are very fond of dancing, and on any feast day or at a marriage ceremony, the first thing they do is to organise a dance. This takes the form of men and women dancing together (a highly disgraceful and unseemly thing among Arabs), at which the men every now and then kiss their partners on the mouth and before the audience.

619 The Sulubba has among his ceremonies, dances, etc., the strange custom of hoisting a cross made from two pieces of wood tied together in the form of a Christian emblem. It may be called his tribal mark or standard.

565 Well-read Arabs, like Shaikh 'Abdullah Salim al Subah, cousin of
619 the Shaikh of Kuwait, and others, say quite definitely that the Sulubba
174 are descendants of the large number of Crusader camp followers, who were taken captive during the Crusade and Saracen wars; that vast numbers of these camp followers were taken in several great battles

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black tents, moving about by the aid of donkeys which seem to form their only visible means of support. These Iraq Kauliyahs are thieves, bad characters, fortune-tellers, are versed in the art of palmistry of sorts, and last but not least their women are in demand for performing the operation of "circumcision of female babies", a rite which is widely practised in Southern Iraq, and among the Muntafiq tribes of the Euphrates and Bani Tamim Arabs.

DESCRIPTION OF A SULUBBA DANCE

(seen on 3rd June, 1934, at Kuwait)

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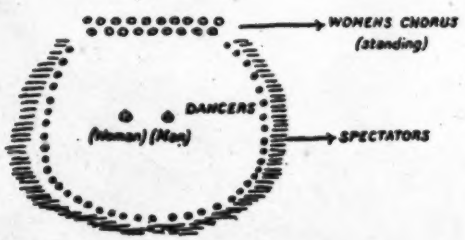
The dance took place in the Sulubba Encampment near Qasr Naif just inside the Naif Gate. The occasion was the three days' feasting preceding the circumcision of a male child. For two days dancing had taken place, but the third day was reserved for the best and biggest show.

The usual cross with half a woman's *thaub* hanging to it or draped over it was in its place over the tent which was rejoicing, a sign to all and everyone that a dance was to take place.

The chief performer and master of ceremonies combined was an elderly man whose child had just been circumcised. He entered the arena formed by Sulubbas male and female and other onlookers, waving a sword round his head and inviting the Sulubbi maidens and Sulubbi braves to come and join him. Presently, after marching round the human circle several times, there was a stir and from a



neighbouring tent a pretty young lass decked out in her festal garments (saffron, violet or green covered with her voile *thaub*), dashed into the circle, bare-headed and bare-faced with her tresses all undone

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and blowing in the breeze. A pretty sight she was, for her hair was long and rich, and her face comely, and chin and neck tatooed all over in pretty patterns. The girl's appearance was the sign for her brother or husband to run into the circle and embrace her, lightly kissing her on the lips (a sort of sign of encouragement no doubt). The girl was then given a cane and the man, with several shrill war-whoops, started dancing before and away from her, all the time facing her, however. As the dance started, the choir consisting of a dozen Sulubbi women started a staccato shout, clapping their hands the while.

The dance was continued by other young men and maidens entering the ring and carrying on as above described. At times several men and women were in the ring together. There was nothing indecent about the behaviour of the dancers, except when the old man with the sword once or twice danced behind his partner in rather suggestive manner. He was the one exception to a perfectly decorous performance. Of the eight or nine maidens who danced, several were distinctly comely—two in particular had remarkably fine hair shining a golden red in the sun from constant treatment with henna. *Ya awaiyil, ya awaiyil* ("Come and dance"), was often repeated between dances by the tough old Master of Ceremonies.

During the dance the girl appeared to act the following: She was pursuing her male dancing partner opposite, and trying to make him come to her. He from retiring in the first place, and acting the part of a shy lover, would eventually succumb to his lady's charms, and would start advancing and showing his admiration by his every movement. Next his girl would start retiring, having won her point, but should the admirer come too near or try and touch her, she would strike him lightly with her cane and force him to beat a retreat.

The man with the sword danced sometimes on one foot and sometimes on the other, but would suddenly start dancing up and down on both feet in rubber-like fashion. The girl danced as most Badawin women do, on the flat of both feet, jumping up and down with stiff legs, and advancing and retiring before her man. As she danced, she nodded her head vigorously, keeping time with her feet, in the direction of the man, but every now and then she varied it by swinging her tresses round and round her head by sideways and circular movements of her head. Throughout the dancing the girl never smiled, but

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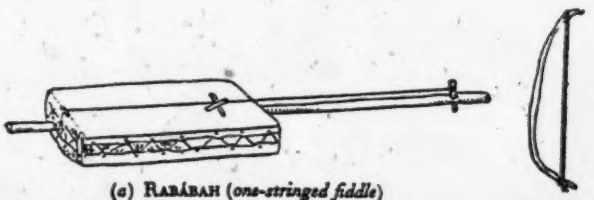
535 852 kept her lips tightly shut, and occasionally placed her hand over her nose and mouth. If the male dancer approached her, as he did on several occasions in rather "loud" fashion, the girl struck him lightly with her cane as if to drive him back. A feature was the girl's rouged lips, and a bright saffron-coloured streak half an inch broad down the centre parting of her hair. They all had this, and it looked like saffron paint (probably strong solution of henna). The dance ended by the girl's brother rushing into the ring and covering his sister's head and face with a portion of her voile garment, and taking her away.

THE RABÁBAH

534 The *rabábah*, or Badawin guitar, was once universally used among the Badawin tribes of Arabia. The minstrels were men of an inferior tribe, or of the servant class, such as Sanas and the like. With the spread of Wahhabism and the rise of the fanatical 'Ikhwan in 1919, the decree went forth that the *rabábah* was a sign of sin, and it was



(*a*) Rabábah (*one-stringed fiddle*) (*b*) Bow

banned entirely. The Northern Shammar, Dhafir and 'Anizah tribes, who were scarcely affected by the puritan revival, still continued to use the *rabábah* freely, getting the servants and retainers to play for them, and with the collapse of 'Ikhwanism after the rebellion and defeat of Faisal al Duwish in 1930, listening to the *rabábah* and the singing of war and love songs by the Sana sections of the tribes, appears to be once again slowly taking hold. To-day, 1937, some of the Rashaida, Hirshan and 'Awazim are definitely taking to it again. The Sulubba and Kauliyah (Gipsies of Iraq) have always used it, even in the days of ultra-Wahhabism, and perhaps this is why it was considered the instrument of the low-born.

534 535 554 To accompany women and girls dancing, only a chorus of women

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singers is used, never the *rabábah*. Men never dance to the tune of the instrument, but only sing to it, either singly or in unison, repeating the words of the soloist, and keeping time by clapping their hands.

It is definitely considered undignified for a pure-bred Arab to play the *rabábah*, and must always be so.

FORTUNE-TELLING AND PROPHECY

Fortune-telling and prophecy are commonly practised among Badawin women, the Sulubba especially. A common Mutairi method of telling fortunes (more as a means of amusement than as a serious forecast) is similar to that practised by our gipsies and old folk at home. Cards are not used, but shells, date-stones, bits of pottery, etc., all jumbled together and cast at random on the ground are used to tell a person's fortune.

Maneira Mutairi (Sana) frequently entertained us in camp with her bag of fortune-telling articles. She used

3 large cowrie shells (with backs missing).

3 cowrie shells with backs missing (small size).

9 Zababit sea-shells with faces broken off, e.g.

1 piece of blue pottery ½″ to 1″ in diameter.

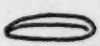
1 piece of red pottery ½″ to 1″ in diameter.

5 date stones.

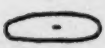
The blue piece of pottery represented the sea.

The red piece of pottery represented the land.

A date stone represented a woman.



A date stone with back uppermost represented a man.



A date stone if it fell sideways on ground represented a camel.